

Cristina, Alberto and the never-ending crisis

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ALBERTO FERNANDEZ AND CRISTINA KIRCHNER. | PRESIDENCY

Is Argentina the worst governed country in the world? Probably not; in Africa, Asia, and even in Latin America there are many which are currently run by gangsters or devotees of some genocidal creed that allows them to massacre anyone they dislike. However, if you include only those countries which at one time or another enjoyed a certain measure of prestige in high places, she has a fair claim to such a distinction. After all, Argentina is the only major country which in living memory has gone from relative riches to rags and, without getting involved in a devastating war or falling prey to a huge natural disaster, has seen poverty keep rising at a time when in other parts of the planet, notably East Asia but also Brazil and much of Europe, hundreds of millions of men and women were getting incorporated into a new middle class.

This did not happen overnight. It was a slow-motion humanitarian catastrophe. Argentina's decline began early in the 20th century and, little by little, gathered pace. All attempts to revert it proved counterproductive; they ended up by strengthening those who feared the root-and-branch reforms fiscal hawks thought necessary could deprive them of what some revealingly called their "conquests." What is more, long before something similar started happening in the United States, Europe, and Japan, an entitlement culture took hold. It is still very much with us. As many have been pointing out recently, a considerable number of Argentines are keen on the consumer side of capitalism but have scant interest in producing enough to acquire the goods they think should be theirs by right.

Is this about to change? Not if Alberto Fernández and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner have anything to do with it. Both see themselves as "progressives" and, to show just how up-to-date they are, often use the wokey "inclusive language" invented by enemies of the "patriarchy," which here has even stranger results

than in the English-speaking lands where the fashion originated, but the truth is that the pair or them are reactionary conservatives whose minds gelled when they were students half a century or so ago.

The ruling couple would dearly like to drag the country back to what, for Cristina at least, was a golden age. Left to himself, Alberto would in all likelihood prefer something very different, but, perplexing as it is to those who thought they knew him before he was offered the presidency and promptly forgot everything that until then he had sworn he believed in, Cristina continues to have him spellbound.



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When Alberto began his stint as president, many assumed that he would take advantage of the almost monarchical powers of the office to free himself from her tutelage. When the pandemic reached Argentina's shores and his stern initial response sent his poll ratings shooting through the roof, it seemed that, with the help of much of the opposition, he would form a national-unity government the Kirchnerites would be unable to dominate. But, faced with a choice between much of the country and Cristina, Alberto let the moment pass and concentrated on trying to convince her he was as loyal a vassal as any mortal could conceivably be. It would soon become clear that she knew the man who for years had been her fiercest and, on occasion, most scurrilous critic far better than anyone else, including, perhaps, Alberto himself.

The upshot is that after a year in office hardly anyone takes him seriously. Even his friends, if he still has any, laugh behind his back at the verbal acrobatics with which he attempts to justify his changes of opinion, sometimes as many as two or three a day, and his desperate efforts to soothe the tender feelings of the woman whose approval he evidently craves. For a country which is sinking ever deeper into a ruinous crisis, having a president who is beholden to a person who is only interested in her own personal wellbeing and that of her offspring is a disaster, but it would seem that, unless those who predict that before too long Argentina's political structures will come crashing down, taking Alberto and Cristina with

them, this is something we will just have to live with.

Cristina's enormous influence would be less baleful if she were merely a standard populist with an appealing smile and some loopy ideas, but it so happens that she is accused of helping herself while in the Pink House to a colossal amount of money, with estimates running into the billions of dollars. She and her supporters say that none of this is true and that she is the victim of "lawfare," by which they mean a campaign devised by cunning right-wingers to get rid of friends of the poor by charging them with crimes they did not commit. In some cases, as in those that led to the sidelining of two Brazilian presidents, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, this may look plausible, since neither got that rich by breaking the rules, but in Cristina's the evidence against her is overwhelming.



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The mere fact that the net worth of her son Máximo comes, by his own admission, to close on US\$3 million, despite the fact that until getting elected to Congress he had been virtually unemployed, is eloquent enough. So too, for that matter, is Cristina's hotel chain and other properties, plus the almost US\$5 million found in Florencia's bank safe; she says she inherited the cash from her parents who allegedly made it while working as public servants.

Not surprisingly, Cristina is obsessed with staying out of jail. For her, everything else, like the fate of the country and those who live in it, is of secondary importance, which is why she celebrated the government's first birthday by attacking the Supreme Court with barely controlled fury for not helping her clear her name. However, even if its members wanted to please her, their awareness that doing so would bring upon them and the country a degree of discredit that would be remembered for many decades is something they cannot overlook.

As for Alberto, he would presumably like to give her and others charged with corruption on a grand scale a presidential pardon, but it would appear that what Cristina wants is to see the entire country take the knee and plead with her to forgive it for ever having doubted her innocence. For this to happen, Argentina

would have to purge herself of half the population or more, an alternative that some Kirchnerites are doing their best to bring about by hounding people who are in a position to seek their fortune abroad to induce them to leave and reducing most of the rest to pauperdom.

Source:

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